

## Demographic Trends in Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijan is one of those republics of the USSR (together with Kazakhstan and the republics of Central Asia), that has experienced rapid population growth in recent decades. The population of Azerbaijan has almost doubled over the past 30 years, from 3,689,000 in 1959 to 6,952,900 in 1988.<sup>1</sup> After a period of decline (1960-1978), the republic's birthrate stabilized in 1979 and since then has risen.<sup>2</sup> The overall trend since 1960, however, is towards a higher death rate and consequent slowing down in the rate of natural increase. While over the past couple of years a slight increase has been registered in the annual average increase in population (from 101,000 prior to 1985, to 107,000 in 1986 and 1987<sup>3</sup>), at the same time the annual rate of population growth has declined significantly from 35.9 per thousand in 1960 to 19.8 per thousand in 1984.<sup>4</sup> The decline in the birthrate is more pronounced in large cities and Industrial centers - and among representatives of the intelligentsia, than in rural areas, but even in the countryside it has given rise to socio-economic problems.

The trend towards an overall slowing down of population growth is, of course, also characteristic for the European part of the USSR, where it has been evident for a longer period than in Azerbaijan.<sup>5</sup> The socio-economic problems arising from the declining birthrate, for example, shortages of manpower<sup>6</sup>, are thus not exclusive to Azerbaijan but occur elsewhere in the USSR and in other Socialist countries.<sup>7</sup>

With the exception of 1970, the number of persons in Azerbaijan working in industry increased every year since 1960, and the agricultural workforce declined (except in 1984). The proportion of the total labor force employed in other sectors remained constant.<sup>8</sup> In the early months of 1985, the urban population of Azerbaijan was 3,553,000 and the rural population 3,061,000. This latter figure represents 46 per cent of the total population of Azerbaijan: in 1920, 79 per cent of the republic's population lived in the countryside.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that, at least until last year's mass out-migration of Armenians during the Armenian campaign for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh, non-Azerbaijanis accounted for 9.1 per cent of the rural population of Azerbaijan and 35.9 per cent of the urban population.<sup>10</sup> (At the time of the 1979 Soviet census, the 475,000 Armenians in Azerbaijan constituted the second-largest ethnic group in the republic and 7.9 per cent of the total population.<sup>11</sup>)

Thus, until comparatively recently the rural population of Azerbaijan was ethnically predominantly Azerbaijani, and was characterized by low mobility - i.e. most people lived their whole lives in the village in which they were born. The primary reason for the sharp decrease in the rural population over the past 70 years has been the steady migration, particularly of young men from the villages to the cities and industrial centers.<sup>12</sup> The factors contributing to this migration process are the same in Azerbaijan as elsewhere in the USSR: the narrow range of employment opportunities in rural areas; the lack of social and cultural amenities; the absence of medical and healthcare facilities (in Shamkhor raion only 6 of a total of 58 villages, and in Lenkoran only 3 of a total of 73, have hospitals or clinics<sup>13</sup>), and even, in some villages, of electricity, drinking water and telephones. The lack of paved roads means that even in fine weather transport from the remoter mountain districts to the nearest raion center is fraught with difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

The migration of young men from the rural areas to the cities has distorted the age-sex composition of the rural population and ultimately led to the disappearance from the map of a number of villages. In Ismailly raion, for example, some villages exist in name only. Others consist of only 2-3 households. The population of the raion center of Lachin has declined from 8,500 to 886, and that of the village of Erekit from 5,700 to 708. Most of the population of the mountain raions of Lachin, Kedabek, Kelbadzhar and Lerik has migrated either to the cities or to lowland areas.<sup>15</sup>

The problem of migration and how to halt - if not reverse it, has been widely discussed in the Azerbaijani press. At a plenum of the board of the Azerbaijani Union of Writers in 1987, for example, the literary critic Aydyn Mamedov remarked upon the fact that promises by former Soviet leaders that the differences between the standard of living in urban and rural areas, and between physical and intellectual work, would be eliminated, have not yielded any improvements in the living conditions of the rural population. On the contrary, "no-one wants to engage in physical work", and many villagers have become buyers of meat and dairy products like the urban population, rather than raise cattle to ensure their self-sufficiency in such basic foods. A further factor that encouraged migration, Mamedov implies, was the propagation of the concept of the "Fatherland" and "citizenship of the USSR", rather than of concern for and pride in one's place of birth.<sup>16</sup>

In conjunction with the trends noted above, it should be borne in mind that over the next 20-22 years 75 per cent of the population increase in the USSR and 85 per cent of persons entering the Soviet work force will be citizens of the Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan and the Transcaucasia, including Azerbaijan. Even if the rate of population growth in Azerbaijan is lower both proportionately and in actual terms than that of the Central Asian republics, this overall trend will give rise to more complex socio-economic problems both in the Azerbaijan SSR and in the "southern tier" of the USSR as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Kommunist, April 30, 1988.
2. Muasir Merhalede Demografiya Siyaseti, Baku, 1986, p.38.
3. Kommunist, February 2, 1988.
4. Muasir Merhalede Demografiya Siyaseti, p.37.
5. op.cit., p.36.
6. op.cit., p.39.
7. op.cit., p.30.
8. op.cit., p.88.
9. op.cit., pp.67-68.
10. op.cit., p.67.
11. See Ann Sheehy: RL 170/80, "Data from the Soviet Census of 1979 on the Azeris and -the Azerbaijan SSR," May 13, 1980.
12. op.cit., p.69.
13. Kend heyati, 1987, No.12, p.41.
14. Kommunist, April 3, 1985.
15. ibid.1 Muasir Merhalede.. p.72.
16. Edebiyat ve injesenet, August 7, 1987.
17. Muasir Merhalede... pp.99-100.